

How Cardinal Mercier's Heroism Fits in With American Idealism

Powerful Personality of Belgian Prelate, Who Combines Attributes of Ascetic and Soldier, Strikes Responsive Chord in Hearts of People Here—His Wonderful War Work Reviewed and Characteristic Traits Described by One Who Has Known Him Many Years

Sister Mary Ignatius O'Kavanagh is an Irish nun of the Sisters of the Christian Doctrine and has spent the greater part of her life in Belgium, where she was educated. She was in a convent in the city of Louvain when the war with Germany broke out, and with many others was driven from the city after the German armies had burnt and sacked the city. She returned a few weeks later and remained in Louvain until late in the autumn of 1914, when she obtained a passport through the German lines with the aid of a German sister and came to the United States.

By SISTER MARY IGNATIUS O'KAVANAGH.

THE powerful personality of Cardinal Mercier evidently appeals to the American people. This is natural. Their idealism draws them instinctively to what is great, strong and fearless. Does the history of the world present more fine embodiments of these qualities than are to be seen in this glorious old man who, during fifty-two long months of captivity and persecution, sustained the morale of his people? A true "Flemish Lion," he fought for their rights.

The first thunder of the German guns found Cardinal Mercier so utterly fearless in the struggle for his people that a most strange rumor got credence in the slums of Malines. The people had never known in him but the kind friend accessible to all, ready to help his children in every difficulty. The gentle old man whose tall, fragile figure was so often seen in the slums chatting with the poor, they could not carve into the hero unmatched in modern times. They had never discovered in him the fighter—should I not say, rather, the lioness whose young had been attacked? How could they, in happy, peaceful little Belgium, that had not an enemy on earth? All through the Cardinal's battle against the heartrending deportation of his people there was in his attitude an absolute fearlessness that seemed uncanny.

Protected by His Courage.

The protection this very fearlessness afforded him enhanced his magical influence—proved a psychological effect to deter the Huns from doing him personal violence. These were facts that his people did not at first understand. So rumor maliciously whispered: "The Cardinal is in secret connivance with the Germans! If not, would he still be alive? Thousands have been court-martialed and shot for things a hundred times less offensive to the enemy than what he says and does every day. Could any human being be so entirely regardless of personal danger? For him no menace seems to exist. Had he not some secret understanding with the Huns they would surely have taken his life the first day he began fighting them with his back to the wall."

This charge could only have sprung from ingratitude. The people were puzzled by his almost superhuman strength and unselfishness. Nervous, half starved, beside themselves with grief at seeing their loved ones dragged into slavery, their poor distraught minds were ready for a subtle to give credence to an insane report as this. Was it secretly spread by the Germans themselves to bring their dauntless opponent into disrepute among his own, thus lessening his hold upon them? Would not such intrigue be quite in keeping with German mentality—German methods as they have been revealed to the world during the war? Fortunately, the cloud soon vanished. The people's old love for their faithful shepherd and their entire trust in him promptly returned. But while the suspicion lasted, how sorely was wrung the loving and singularly sensitive heart of the great Cardinal.

A great charm of his Eminence is his keen sense of humor. Most heartily he enjoys a good joke. A remarkably rapid thinker, he is noted for the wit and promptitude of his replies. One who knows him well has remarked: "He has a special gift for silencing his opponents without ever wounding their feelings—he simply takes their breath away. But the wit that leaves them without a word to answer, please, is keenly relished. This rare gift, that only a brilliant intellect combined with a warm heart can possess, won him the admiration even of the Anti-Clerical Socialists. Long before the war they had ceased attacking him."

Not so, however, in his dealings with the Huns! Little he cared to temper with them the hot blast of his wit! His words, of fire swept over them, scathing, scorching. Their souls must have cowered beneath his gaze and the majesty of a wrath that evoked visions of the Prophets of old. But oftener still it was a cleverly veiled sarcasm that made a man sometimes enough to petrify the enemy into submission. This incident will illustrate: One day several people came running to him in the street, saying that a German soldier had just arrested a priest. This priest, it seems, had rescued a girl whom a soldier sought to molest, and in the struggle he had struck the Hun.

"Where is he?" demanded the Cardinal.

"In the guardhouse," replied one of the people. "They said they would shoot him."

Went to the Guardhouse.

To the guardhouse the long, swift stride of the Cardinal soon brought him. With folded arms the tall figure stood for a moment on the threshold, his blazing eyes sweeping over the dense and noisy crowd until they rested on the object of his search. There a priest stood against the wall at the furthest end of the big hall, awaiting the bullet that was to end his days. All at once the presence of the fearless old man was noted and every head turned round. A sudden silence fell upon the uniformed rabble. Not a word did the Cardinal say. He raised his right hand and with his long forefinger beckoned to the priest to come to him. Back the soldiers flew to the right and left, and up through the

severe lacerations to his head and face. When confronted with subsequently he remarked with fervor that his injuries were a real source of joy, inasmuch as through them the child's life was saved. His first word on recovering consciousness after the accident was: "What about the little girl?"

Strength and Sweetness Combined.

His personal character is a demonstration of Samson's famous riddle—strength and sweetness combined in one—Fortiter et suaviter. Both are revealed in his face—a surely striking one! The high and very broad forehead, the strong nose, the delicate jaw, the wonderfully sweet and gracious smile are features that rivet attention. Dominating, illuminating, are eyes so deeply spiritual of expression that instinctively one realizes—this man knows God.

The rare force of his intellect was well known before circumstances revealed this many-sided man from other viewpoints. He was barely 30 when the eagle eyes of Pope Leo XIII. singled him out for the formidable task of reviving the philosophy of the

shells—the Cardinal has inaugurated a measure which, I fancy, is unique. He has opened a special seminary for men of ripe age—pious, unmarried men who are willing to devote themselves in the priesthood to the present needs of their fellow countrymen. The most elemental studies needed for the sacerdotal duties are all the Cardinal requires of these devoted souls.

He keeps in touch with every one of his priests. That he may know them all from the outset he has one student from his seminary to breakfast with him every morning. Each has his turn. That he expects his priests to live up to a very high ideal is no secret. When he returned from Rome in September, 1914, after the election of Pope Benedict XV., he found that his clergy had deemed it necessary for safety to let their heads grow and to exchange the cassock for secular dress. The mere fact of their being priests had proved fatal to many of their brethren. The Cardinal promptly expressed a wish that they should resume their habitual appearance.

"Every sheep of the flock should, in



CARDINAL MERCIER, ARCHBISHOP OF MALINES, ARRIVING IN BALTIMORE AS GUEST OF CARDINAL GIBBONS. (WOODWARD & LOUDWELL)

long lane their prisoner marched—and not one of them moved or uttered a word as he followed his pastor to safety.

Such spiritual heroism as Cardinal Mercier has displayed since the beginning of the war has been rarely equalled in the world's history. With his country lying stark and silent at his feet, this prelate dared to step forth, one puny voice against the might of the Central Powers, raising his voice in protest against the unbridled devastation around him. After the sacking of Louvain and the destruction of her university, his alma mater, with the priceless library therein, the great Cardinal's human heart well nigh broke. It may be that the passionate prayer of this latter day saint was answered by the inspiration of that famous pastoral letter which afterwards shook the world with the strength of its pleading. At any rate, Christendom has listened breathlessly ever since to each word Cardinal Mercier has publicly uttered, sure of its unflinchingly truthful origin.

Only a nature formed from a combination of the ascetic and the soldier could dare speak at such a time and in such a manner as has this courageous prelate. And yet the Cardinal is not a young man. Born in 1851, he is far from being either youthful in appearance or strong in physique. Tall and thin, he is the ascetic in every lineament. Yet of his physical and moral bravery there have been few peers in history. It is related of him that on a morning when he was driving in his automobile along the streets of a neighboring village a little girl ran directly in the path of the machine. Instantly the Cardinal shouted to the driver to swerve from the road, though in the fulfilling of this command the chauffeur was obliged to break for a high stone wall. The Cardinal was thrown out and suffered

thirteenth century and applying it to modern science. Needless to say, human nature being as it is, this distinction awoke undying jealousies. Here, perhaps, for the first time were his strength and gentleness seriously tested. Why did he assign this room to himself? No need to ask—did not Christ say He had not a stone whereon to lay His head? Did He not say: "Go, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and follow me." (Mark 10: 21.) Cardinal Mercier—a follower of Christ—follows Him closely indeed.

There is not a shadow of ostentation in this practice of poverty—Holy Poverty as the Church calls it—a virtue that has been dear to all the saints. Absolute sincerity is stamped on every word and deed of this truly great man—as simple as a child with all his greatness. A few lines from the Rev. Father Stillmans in his little sketch of the Cardinal, published in January, 1915, delineates him truly. "Cardinal Mercier," he says, "is a wonderful man—familiar with the greatest problems, yet concerned with the smallest details; honored as few men have been, yet simple as a child; working from early morning until far into the night, yet always having time to listen to every one. He is known to the whole of Belgium as a living saint—kindness and readiness personified."

Like a Call From God.

A call from one of his priests in need is to him like a call from God. Late one bitterly cold evening about two winters ago a secret message reached him. A priest was dying in a village about twelve miles off and was anxious to speak to the Cardinal. No trains, no trolley cars were running, save for the Germans; no horses remained in the country; his motor had long since been taken from him. But to him no lack of transportation could be an excuse for delay. At once he started off, ministered to the dying man and after closing his eyes took to the road again. So in the morning after nearly a whole night's tramp he found his usual hour for celebrating mass found him at the altar.

That day before noon the citizens of Malines were subjected to an enormous fine. They were punished because the Cardinal had gone beyond the city limits without a passport. To each one he had taken him fully two days to obtain the passport. Promptly and proudly did the impoverished citizens pay—their Cardinal must be free to come and go were they to be punished a hundred times for it. O little Belgium, no wonder you have won the hearts of all civilized nations!

Cardinal Mercier's love for the poor is deep and strong. By sharing in their privations he feels himself drawn still nearer to Christ and to them. His private life is one of austere indifference. A couple of years before the war broke out Malines was started by a word that flew around the city: "No servant girl in a decent family would be given so shabby a room to sleep in as that of our Cardinal." The fact is, an electrician having to place some wires in the Archbishop's house was obliged to pass through the Cardinal's bedroom. Struck with its utter simplicity and being alone, he took the liberty to inspect it—only planks on which lay a sack filled with straw; two kitchen chairs of unvarnished deal, a clothes press and a washstand of the same coarse material; curtainless windows; not a rug on the bare, unpainted floor.

Such was the room of the Cardinal—a Prince of the Church. The Archbishop's Palace contains a stately apartment for each of his Suffragan Bishops—always ready to receive them. Why did he assign this room to himself? No need to ask—did not Christ say He had not a stone whereon to lay His head? Did He not say: "Go, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and follow me." (Mark 10: 21.) Cardinal Mercier—a follower of Christ—follows Him closely indeed.



CARDINAL MERCIER'S ARRIVAL ON NORTHERN PACIFIC. Left to Right... ARCHBISHOP HAYES, CARDINAL MERCIER and MAYOR HYLAND. (PAUL THOMPSON, N.Y.)

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Needless to say the fare of such a man is of the humblest—as many a chance guest has discovered. One day, shortly after he became Archbishop, two priests from a part of the country where good fish is rare happened to call on him just as he was sitting down to dinner. He invited them to share his meal. It was Friday. As they crossed the threshold one whispered to the other: "Say—we're in luck—a dainty fish dinner!" To their surprise the menu consisted of pea soup, potatoes and "stockfish," that is, dried cod, the cheapest and commonest food on the Belgian market. For dessert a "tarte aux prunes," a coarse, heavy prune pie relished by the Belgian workingman. To crown the feast water only was on the table until the Cardinal ordered beer for his two guests.

Now when a Belgian family has fallen into the direst poverty its case is not stated in detail—all that people say to express the worst is, "His beloved de Peul!" (They drink water!) The universal drink, with a large percentage of exquisite and costly wines, is beer, the mild Belgian beer that can intoxicate no one. Indeed, the well known wine cellars of Belgium were the grand prize promised to the German soldiery before they crossed the frontier. Nor were they slow to begin looting them! Soon began streaming into Germany long processions of trains—all loaded with bottles, the store of generations. Cardinal Mercier, though not a teetotaler, seldom tastes either wine or beer. To his ordinary guests, however, he usually offers the latter. Yet his hospitality is most generous, often quite munificent.

Of the latter sort the following incident gives a touching proof. A group of working girls from the "Minimes" of Louvain, were entertained by His Eminence. The occasion was this. A religious of that convent had created the exquisite "Louvain embroidery," a revival and modernization of the oldest of all artistic needlework, a thing that fell into oblivion when modern lace came into being three or four centuries ago. This highly artistic revival was awarded the gold medal at the World's Fair held in Ghent in 1913. Both employers and employees were anxious that their beloved Cardinal should be the first to possess a specimen of the industry. Their hearts in their fingers, they set to work. In a few months they presented him with a rochet, that looked as if it had drifted out of fairyland.

Then came an invitation to all the girls who had brought into existence so dainty a creation to assist at the Cardinal's mass the first time he wore their masterpiece. With the invitation came a munificently generous bank note to defray the expenses of the journey. He celebrated mass for them in his private chapel, after which he seated them himself at an almost sumptuous breakfast laid out in one of the state reception rooms. Here again his big, tender heart showed itself. He had said mass in a black cassock, but wishing those poor girls to harvest from their work all possible pleasure he came to them after breakfast wearing their lace over his scarlet silk robes.

A cry of delight and surprise broke from them. They crowded round him, each one fingering and showing him the "motif" she had worked—he questioned them as to how they had produced such a marvel. Never had the delicate, filmy fabric appeared to them so lovely as now in the light of his admiration. There he stood—a father with his children, chatting with them, turning from side to side to let each one see her section in the best light—its perfection enhanced by the beauty of the scarlet silk.

Then he allowed them to roam through the house, a State owned building worthy of the long line of prelates it had sheltered. Little did he dream how forgotten they soon would be in the lustre of his own glory! Before dismissing the girls, after their long visit, he gave to each his picture, a large photograph on which he wrote her name and a blessing for her and her family over his signature.

Funerals for Poor Believers.

Another instance of his love for the poor is seen in an organization he started shortly before the war. One day, wandering in the slums of Brussels, he met a little coffin being carried to the cemetery without any semblance of Christian respect for the dead. On inquiry, he discovered that in general the poor shunned the expense of a religious funeral for their little ones. It was short work for the

Cardinal to organize means of inducing the children of the "superfluous" to bury the babies of the poor. A circular sent at once to the paying school of every parish explained the plan and requested that girls and boys, from 11 to 14 years, be formed into groups of twelve, with one of their number elected as leader. Two or three times a week a message from the City Hall or from the parish priest acquainted these young leaders with the addresses and location of the deceased children. At hours prearranged so as not to interfere with school duty the little leaders summon their followers. Carrying a

Cardinal Mercier Won Fame Long Before War Broke Out

CARDINAL Mercier—his full name is Desire Felicien Françoise Joseph Mercier—was born on November 22, 1851, in the Belgian village of Braine-l'Alleud, only a few miles from Waterloo. For many years before the beginning of the war the great Belgian prelate was famous in ecclesiastical circles for his vast intellectual attainments, and when the German armies invaded Belgium he became one of the best known and outstanding figures of the world. He worked with the utmost zeal throughout the German occupation to lessen the terrors of the invasion and to keep the fires of faith and courage alive in the hearts of his people. His defiance of the German military governors reached a climax when he issued, in the latter part of 1914, the wonderful pastoral letter which has become one of the most famous documents of history, and in which he belittled the pretensions and the people that in their inner souls the owed the German governor "neither attachment nor obedience."

But any one at all familiar with the ecclesiastical history of Belgium was not surprised that the voice of Belgium's Cardinal should be heard crying out against the invader and defying the might of Germany. Throughout the centuries the great clergymen of Belgium have been the heralds of patriotism and the champions of liberty. Austria, France and Prussia in other years were defied and resisted by Cardinal Franksberg, and the celebrated Bishop of Ghent—Prince de Broglie—opposed Napoleon the Third, and later King William of Holland. Both of them died in exile, because they could not be deterred from their duty by threats or by imprisonment. Each of them issued letters of much the same tenor as the famous pastoral letter which made Cardinal Mercier's name a household word throughout the civilized world.

Always a Hard Worker.

Cardinal Mercier has been a hard and indefatigable worker all his life and long before he became Cardinal was known to the entire world of philosophy and science. In appearance he is tall and slender, the personification of the ascetic, and those who have known him for years say that his life conforms to this model in every respect, and is simple, even severe. In the whole of Belgium he is known as a living saint, gentle and kindly, and always ready to do whatever lies in his power to lessen the trials of his people. He holds a very special love for America and the people of America, and has said great tribute to the soldiers of the United

States and the part that this country played in the great war. This love of the United States may perhaps be explained by the fact that the Cardinal's uncle, the Very Rev. Adrian J. Croquet, was for many years one of the pioneer Catholic missionaries of America. He came to this country in 1859 and went to Oregon, where for twenty-eight years he was in charge of the missions of the Grand-ronde Reservation in that State.

As a young man Cardinal Mercier distinguished himself as an advocate and an executive, as president of the Leo XIII. Seminary and of the University of Philosophy at the University of Louvain. Thirty years ago Mr. Keane, then rector of the Catholic University in America at Washington, tried to obtain his services for this country, even going so far as to make a personal appeal to the Pope. But so great was the love of the people of Belgium for him that the Pope felt obliged to refuse the request, and Cardinal Mercier remained at Louvain. In February, 1906, he was appointed Archbishop of Mechlin, and on January 13, 1907, was created a Cardinal, to succeed the late Cardinal Goossens.

By his wise rule and lovable character Cardinal Mercier endeared himself to the people of Belgium, and when the time came for Belgium to withstand the initial shock of the German invasion his fearless attitude toward the armies of Von Kluck had much to do with maintaining the faith and steadfast morale of the Belgians and with the united front with which the people of that country faced the enemy. He was at Liege during the attack by the Germans, and when that city was captured went to Malines, and only quit that city when the German bombardment made it untenable for any one but the soldiers. He then went to Antwerp, where he remained until its fall.

Thereafter he continued to discharge the duties of his high office, jealously guarding the liberty of his priests and the interests of his people, interceding for civilians arrested on trumped-up charges by the German military authorities, and in general proving himself a veritable thorn in the flesh of the invading Teuton Generals. At every opportunity Cardinal Mercier exhorted his people to maintain their faith and their defiance of the enemy, and to look forward to the day when the armies of the Allies would triumph and Belgium would again be free.

Cardinal Mercier made no effort to leave Antwerp when the Germans entered the city, and the German Government

Gift of an Automobile.

Before the Germans came and took from the Belgians everything worth taking Cardinal Mercier had an automobile, a present given him by a wealthy friend. This was a source of great saving to him, both in time and money. In Belgium a Cardinal takes rank as a Prince of Blood Royal; he stands next to the King. But honors are sometimes costly. Etiquette imposes upon him many obligations. For instance, when travelling he is supposed to be alone with his suite in a railway coach; consequently he has to pay for all the seats, even when he may have with him only his private secretary. Then at the stations where he enters and leaves the train he is expected to tip each employee with a 2 franc piece. Of course, they spring up like mushrooms all over the place. The station master and each of his assistants must have a 5 franc piece. When he uses the royal state coach, always at his disposal, all of the tips have to be in gold.

These details not being generally known, the tender souls of the anti-clerical Socialists were deeply distressed when the Cardinal accepted a motor car. The Cardinal taking his case in an automobile instead of trudging about on foot like the working folk! The sinful luxury of a motor for a man who was supposed to sympathize with the poor! It was shocking! Certain papers were filled with lessons of the Christian virtues of humility and charity as they ought to be practised by a man of God. For a while the Cardinal let them howl; then started them into good behavior by an open letter so powerful, so thoroughly to the point, so witty and withal so dignified that—well, if the stories I heard at the time are true, it looked as if they all wanted to kiss him!

So the Cardinal kept his motor car, thus saving for his beloved poor over one thousand a year. Moreover, by retaining the sinful luxury, he was enabled to call on any of his priests when he had a moment of leisure.

(Continued on Following Page.)